By Phylis Cancilla Martinelli.
240 pages.

In Undermining Race: Ethnic Identities in Arizona Copper Camps, 1880–1920, Phylis Cancilla Martinelli seeks to expand on the role of Italian immigrants in the West by offering a corrective to studies that see the region solely through the lens of “heroic myths of white adventurers, explorers, settlers, and of course the pan-global figure of the cowboy.” Examining three mining communities in Arizona from 1880 through 1920, the author highlights the roles of northern, southern, and eastern Europeans (primarily Italians and Spaniards) and Mexicans in order to construct a “re-envisioned West.” According to the author, part of this re-envisioned West, and a central aim of the book, means complicating the racial landscape of these frontier towns beyond a simple racial binary of white and other (108). Working within scholarship discussing southern and eastern European immigration and race and whiteness, Undermining Race seeks to do the same for Italian immigrants in the West.

The book’s first three chapters provide background information detailing Arizona’s development into a state of mining towns; Italian and Spanish emigration; and discrimination directed toward Italian and other minorities in the West, particularly in Arizona. Chapters 4 through 6 concentrate on the three mining towns in Arizona central to Martinelli’s study: Globe, Bisbee, and Clifton-Morenci. The author contends that laborers in western mining camps remained multiethnic and multiracial. If workers happened to work side by side, they received differentiated wages based upon where they were placed within racialized categories. According to Martinelli, “variations in racial microsystems meant that the parameters of acceptance changed from one place to another. Such differences were not random but were related to identifiable social factors in each of the isolated mining districts in Arizona’s eastern mountain zone.” Throughout the book Martinelli positions Italians (both northern and southern) as an “in-between” racial group (167).

In Globe, Italians found themselves in a stronger situation than in Bisbee or Clifton-Morenci. For example, the presence of a strong pro-immigrant union, such as the Western Federation of Miners, offered lower-skilled Italian immigrants a chance for unionization and social mobility. According to Martinelli, “had Globe developed as did some other white camps, Italians there would have been excluded from the union” just as Globe’s Mexican immigrants and Apache Indians had been (167). The author also contends that a critical mass of Italian immigrants (from Piedmont) served the community well by fostering a more cohesive, thriving “Little Italy,” to use her term. On the other hand, Bisbee remained, as the author’s chapter title suggests, “the whitest white camp.” Martinelli claims that a much more unfavorable view toward Italians in Bisbee, coupled with segmented occupational roles between Italians and Mexicans, hindered any form of unity between these groups. However, this was not the case in Clifton-Morenci, at least for a brief period. According to Martinelli, “situational factors allowed a coalition of Latins to band together on labor issues to resist mining company interests” (169). Most notably, the author points to unionization efforts during 1915–1917 as evidence of this racial unity. Martinelli contends that the cooperation of
Italian and Spanish, or what she would describe as EuroLatins, with Mexican miners, although divided, offered proof of the in-between status of Italians in Clifton-Morenci. According to the author, “it was this melded culture, residential proximity, and a shared place in the unequal wage structure that led to resistance. . . . In the right racial microsystem, unity was nurtured, and it proved to be long lasting” (164).

Although Undermining Race sheds new light on the racial and ethnic composition of these sparsely populated mining towns, the book often falls short in delivering on its stated mission in significant ways. One has to do with terminology and its usage; the other has to do with inadequate discussion of how Italian immigrants responded to conditions on the ground. Terms such as nonwhite, white, ethnic, racial, European, EuroLatin, Italian Latin, southern Italian, and northern Italian, for example, are often used interchangeably or in contrast to one another. It is true that some terms, such as Italian, southern Italian, and Latin, could be used as substitutes during this period, however, the author assigns labels (some historical, many contemporary, e.g., EuroLatin) without clearly defining to whom these terms were applied and why. In some paragraphs Italians are referred to as “European,” “Latin,” and “EuroLatin”; however, there’s no sustained evidentiary analysis to support why these terms are necessary (127). How are Italian Latins different from EuroLatins? Do these terms have historical significance, or are they contemporary terms imposed on the past? In a microstudy that seeks to understand how differing groups interacted in fluid racial and socioeconomic environments, these terms must be defined or they risk becoming meaningless.

The next problem with terminology is that the author frequently treats northern Italians, southern Italians, and, by virtue of this, northern Europeans and southern Europeans as monolithic groups. According to Martinelli, “Southerners were viewed as clannish, explosive, and a shade or two darker than northerners. However, to some Americans all Italians were outsiders, and the North-South split did not make a difference” (38). No doubt some Americans lumped southern and northern Italians together as Italians; however, the racialized differentiation among northern and southern Italians in Italy and the United States remained prevalent. Among provincial Italian immigrants it remained more immediate (United States Immigration Commission 1911, 81–85; see also Roediger 2005, 112–114 and Orsi 1992, 313–347). What did this mean for Italian immigrants? How did the north–south question affect how they viewed, or learned, the American racial code? Sidestepping these questions often impairs the author’s analysis. It is especially important to address this issue when most of the Italian immigrants who immigrated to Arizona mining towns hailed from northern Italy.

The chapter on Bisbee provides an example of this terminological fuzziness. The author states that the Bisbee “camp matured as a white man’s camp . . . as skilled native-born and northern European hard rock miners took over the stratification mores of the area.” We assume from this statement that “northern European” means “white” in Bisbee. According to Martinelli, as the “racial climate became evident . . . Mexicans were lowest, with native whites and northern Europeans at the top. The inbetweeners were the central and southern Europeans” (108). However, in providing an outline of the Italian immigrants who comprised the bulk of the Italian population, the author states that the three primary groups who settled the area (the 1900 census listed fifty-nine people with Italian ancestry) originated from Trentino, Piedmont, and Sicily.
Did the Trentini and Piemontese see themselves as northern Italian—and therefore white and superior racially? Did they see themselves as “inbetweeners” because they were Italian? Given that northern Europeans occupied the top of the racial ladder in Bisbee, did northern Italians identify more closely with those groups or with Sicilians (or their “southern cousins,” as the author describes them)? Speaking of the Trentini, for that matter, the author states “they kept themselves apart from southern Italians.” How would this fact support the notion of a pan-Italian identity (114–116)?

Unfortunately, as in other sections of the book, we never get a sense of how Italians responded in any substantive manner. Given the sectional divides among Italians, it is entirely plausible that Bisbee’s northern Italian population may have had a clearer path toward assimilation than their southern counterparts. This, along with their sparse numbers, may have more to do with why a more cohesive ethnic community did not form in Bisbee, rather than attributing it to the “generally unfavorable attitude toward Italians” (132). In addition, other major examples of how Italians learned race and color in Arizona remain unexplored. For example, what did it mean for Italians to see blacks segregated in school? Or to witness Mexicans forced to sit in the back of the bus? How did the fact that they could worship at a church for “Anglo parishioners” and “socialize with influential people through church ties” influence their perception of Mexicans and African Americans? Was this not race-making right before their eyes? Did this serve to “whiten” these immigrants? Were they already white due to the privilege of not being segregated (122–124)? These are the types of questions that must be explored in order to provide a deeper, more nuanced analysis of how race is made in American society.

However, despite these shortcomings, Undermining Race provides a useful window through which to examine how American, Italian, Mexican, and Spanish mine workers interacted and created race in Arizona mining towns. Phylis Martinelli’s book remains a timely contribution to the ever-expanding and complex fields of immigration, race, and whiteness.

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Works Cited

